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SUBJECT: ICELAND: EUR ENGAGEMENT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

REF: 09 State 124579

¶1. (U) Gender equality and women's issues are top priorities in Iceland and the country has achieved strong results in these spheres. Iceland ranked third in the United Nations' Human Development Index in 2009, and placed first in the 2009 Global Gender Gap Index, published by the World Economic Forum.

¶2. (U) The Global Gender Gap Index measures how well countries divide their resources and opportunities between women and men, looking at economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment as well as health and survival. According to the 2009 Index, Icelandic women are surpassing Icelandic men in college enrollment and in attaining professional and technical jobs, and have achieved near equal labor force participation. The country also ranked first in political empowerment.

¶3. (U) The financial and economic crisis that shocked Iceland in October 2008 led to the downfall of the government and the elevation of veteran politician Johanna Sigurdardottir to the post of prime minister in early 2009, becoming the first Icelandic woman to hold that position. Women make up 43 percent of the seats in parliament following the most recent parliamentary election held in April 2009. Half of the twelve government ministers are women. The Speaker of Parliament and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court are also both women.

¶4. (U) The combination of powerful female role models and progressive government policies, like three to six months of paid maternity leave, are working to close the gender gap even further. One example of a best practice utilized by the Icelandic Government includes a government-funded center for promoting gender equality located in the town of Akureyri. The center provides counseling and education on gender equality to national and municipal authorities, institutions, companies, individuals, and NGOs. Another example of an Icelandic success story is an international conference hosted by the Icelandic Foreign Ministry and the University of Iceland in June 2009 on Women, Peace and Security. The conference was attended by 200 participants and focused on conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace processes, and women's empowerment.

¶5. (U) Iceland passed the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men in 1976. This legislation decreed that all individuals shall have equal opportunities to benefit from their own enterprise and to develop their skills irrespective of gender. Subsequent legislation has included a provision to ensure that there are equal numbers of women and men on public committees, councils and boards. Iceland supports gender equality through central, regional, and national bureaus that oversee the implementation of these laws.

¶6. (U) The Icelandic government is also actively working to combat trafficking in persons and gender based violence. Parliament approved an action plan against trafficking in persons in March 2009. In December, the parliament passed an amendment to the General Penal Code with respect to trafficking in persons which clears the road for ratification of the Palermo Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and

the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. In October 2009 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights sponsored a well-attended symposium on human trafficking. An action plan against gender-based violence was adopted in 2007 and it is currently being implemented.

17. (U) Post has engaged with and assisted the Icelandic Government in its battle against trafficking in persons. Notably, Post sponsored one individual's travel to the United States for a two-week IVLP program entitled "Combating Trafficking in Persons." It is Post's intention to send another individual on a similar program this summer. In addition Post has worked to increase the lines of communication between Washington and Reykjavik on the TIP topic. There is, for example, a Digital Video Conference scheduled for January 14 that will allow officials from the Icelandic government to discuss the matter with their colleagues in State Department's G/TIP office.

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